

## Chapter I

# Some Notes on a French Debate

### Introducing Ontotheology

Thinkers such as Levinas, Marion, and Lacoste are all trying to understand what the word *God* might mean in the contemporary world once that which was understood by this term previously has been proclaimed dead. Indeed, it seems that the God that passed away is brought to life again in what has been called “the theological turn of French phenomenology.”<sup>1</sup> Lacoste, Marion, and Levinas, then, try to think God as other than the ‘God’ of ontotheology.

Although the term *ontotheology* was first used by Kant, the concept and the problem thereof stems from Heidegger. According to Heidegger, ontotheology first and foremost concerns philosophy. Broadly speaking, Heidegger criticized philosophy’s tendency to talk about God too hastily and too easily. Philosophy’s task is to think ‘being’ and not God. For Heidegger, ontotheology and metaphysics are essentially a forgetting of being, concerned merely with beings. Therefore, philosophy cannot open up to the ‘ontological difference’ between being and beings; it prefers controllable, foreseeable, and ‘present-at-hand’ objects. Objects lend themselves easily to the reckoning and calculations required for technology’s mastery over being. It is in this sense that we encounter in our God talk the same, univocal primacy of beings or objects. In general, the ontotheological endeavor seeks an ultimate reason that can account for the totality of beings. Its point of departure—beings—forbids that ontotheology encounters anything *other*, at the end of the chain of beings, than *a* being. Proceeding from the finite to the infinite, ontotheology’s obsession with objects decides in advance how God will enter the philosophical discourse. This ‘God’ is often modeled after causal theories—as much as each house requires an architect as its cause, the

totality of beings requires a *'prima causa,'* a *First Being*. God is an instrument used, by philosophy, to found finitude, to give reasons for the totality of beings. God, in the ontotheological way of thinking, *must* be a foundation or the explanation of the totality of beings. God cannot be anything else than that instance that saves the finite system from its own contingency and incoherency. And yes, *this is what we all call "God"* or, rather, this is what we used to call God.

The modern subject is, if not the instigator then at least the heir of all ontotheologies. Marion, Lacoste, and Levinas all frame their thought around that which might counter the subject's reckoning with beings and objects (respectively 'givenness' for Marion, 'liturgy' for Lacoste, and 'the other' for Levinas). The 'modern' subject, mainly identified in the works of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl proclaims itself to be—or at least that is the way it came to be perceived—the center of the world, the 'master and possessor of nature.' Human beings, in modernity, were thought of as free, autonomous, and active agents. To be sure, such an Enlightenment was a liberation in a manifold of ways, but it is not my task to repeat those here. The fact remains that many philosophers criticize this portrayal of the human being as an autonomous agent, since such autonomy is deemed to be responsible for many problems contemporary societies are facing. I will offer some indications as to the kinds of problems these might be in the next section. All of the authors I have chosen as this work's privileged interlocutors—Levinas, Marion, Lacoste, and, through them, Heidegger—insist on giving an account of the human being as a more passive, affective instance. Heidegger, for instance, criticizes the 'world-less ego' as it comes to us from the philosophical tradition starting with Descartes. Human beings, according to Heidegger, are already in a world. It is this fact of finding oneself in a world with others that is the proper topic of philosophical reflection. Levinas and Marion, for reasons which will become obvious shortly, primarily target the transcendental '*Ich denke*' of Kant. '*Le Je pense transcendental,*' Levinas says, does not speak; it is the word of, really, no one.<sup>2</sup> The human being is not to be found in this way. Marion, then, contends that it would be better to substitute the '*Ich denke*' for an 'I feel' (*'je sens'*), and Lacoste will outline the human being as a radically passive being.

The decentering of subjectivity is thus for the most part a confrontation with transcendental and idealist philosophy. That is why much of the debate has turned upon the critique of 'representation.' The ego cogito of Descartes indeed *represents* itself as a thinking substance, and Kant is famous for, among many other things of course, the '*Ich Denke muss alle Vorstellungen*

*begeleiten.*' But why, precisely, critique *representations*? Because, in the very epistemological operation of the subject representing an object, this object is put under the guard of the subject and is submitted to the subject's power to know and represent in the manner it thinks appropriate. For Heidegger, this means that the subject-object distinction rages through our contemporary technological cultures to such an extent that human beings tend to lose the ability to encounter being and beings in another way than as a represented object.<sup>3</sup> Levinas would agree but considers the main victim of such a violent reduction the other human being, who, when represented through a subject, loses his or her uniqueness and becomes merely 'one amongst many,' a genus of a species. Marion sees in this reduction to object-ness an alienation of the phenomenon itself and tries to liberate phenomenality from its representational constraints by evoking the possibility of a phenomenon showing itself of itself. Lacoste's liturgical experience seeks, first and foremost, to liberate our experience of God from all of these 'modern' constraints.

All of these authors thus agree that the power of this autonomous subject must be broken. However, on closer inspection, we find these thinkers time and again returning to the subject-object distinction. The question of this work, then, is whether a simple reversal of the subject-object distinction suffices to break out of the ontotheological scheme.

### The Present and Our Obsession with Objects

Heidegger, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, spoke of "the spell of modern man's way of Being," which, for him, was an "addict[ion] to thinking of beings as *objects* and allowing the being of beings to be exhausted in the objectivity of the object."<sup>4</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger refused a long-standing tradition that saw beings merely as representations or as objects. Our being-in-the-world, Heidegger says, hardly encounters objects at all. For this reason he draws a distinction between objects, which are *present-at-hand*, and tools or equipment, which are *ready-to-hand*. Although Heidegger uses a hammer as an example of equipment that is *ready-to-hand*, beings which are *ready-to-hand* cannot be reduced to what we usually see as a tool.<sup>5</sup> The distinction between *ready-to-hand* and *present-at-hand* is simple: When one is playing the guitar, one doesn't reflect on the chords and on the corresponding finger settings. Heidegger would say that while playing the guitar, one is involved in a caring relationship toward things that are *ready-to-hand*. The guitar only becomes an object—*present-at-hand*—when

one, while playing, reflects on these settings. However, if one does this—and this is Heidegger's point—one can no longer play the guitar: the guitar has become an object, present-at-hand, and loses the self-evident character that is intended for things ready-to-hand.

Many of Levinas' own themes echo those of Heidegger. Levinas was mainly concerned with the problem of encountering *the other as other*. However, every other I meet in the public space is an other that I need and use as a means to my own ends. When I buy my train ticket, I do not see the other as other, I see him or her as the one who is going to give me the ticket that I need to get on the train. Levinas says that in this way, the other person is reduced to my representation of him or her, to that which he or she can do and mean for me. Every representation, every image, is, according to Levinas, instrumental and only an expression of humanity's will to power.

Both for Heidegger and Levinas, the question is how to escape the self-evident manner with which knowledge proceeds. Whereas Heidegger asks how we can trace the being of beings (and so re-open the question of being), Levinas wonders if an encounter with the other as other, and not merely with the other as what he or she can mean 'for me,' is possible at all. Marion expresses a similar concern but does so with regard to our knowledge of God. In his book *God without Being*, he distinguishes between the idol and the icon (GWB, 7–24). The first is very close to what I am describing here as an object. The idol is, according to Marion, an *image* of God. God is reduced to that which human beings can know, represent, or experience of God. God is, in this case, modeled after our own image and, in and through this image, tied to finite conditions of appearing. However, if God is truly God, Marion argues, the mode of God's epiphany should be unconditional and thus not restricted to the limits set forward by any mode of (human) knowledge whatsoever.

But, what precisely is an object? Consider the following example. When I look at a dinner table, I evidently see only one side of it. That I, however, still see the table as a table, that is, as consisting of a plateau with four legs, arises from the fact that I constitute the table. *Constitution* is Husserl's term and refers to a mental act that somehow adds to the perception of one leg the three others in order to secure the unity of the table. Constitution occurs with almost every object human beings perceive. (Think of a cube, the dark side of the moon, etc.). However, suppose that I walk around the table and discover that what I constituted as a brown table is, in fact, partially green. One of the legs can be, for instance, colored green. This

does not alter my constitution of the table as a table in a significant way. Marion concludes that our knowledge, experience, and representations are, in one way or another, exercising a will to power, or, in his terms: the unseen of an object—the green leg of the table—always has the rank of a preseen (BG, 186; IE, 35–36). Though I may not have seen that the table has one green leg, I still constitute the table as a plateau with four legs. An object therefore can only be unknown, not unknowable. Everything that one wants to know of an object can be known, and it is in this sense that, once again, knowledge is power. Objects are transparent; they have no secrets.

How, then, can we encounter the unknowable? And how, if everything that we see is always ‘preseen,’ can we see (or experience or know) the invisible God? How, turning to Levinas again, can we see the other as other, and not only as what he or she can mean ‘for me’? Or, to use Heidegger’s terminology, how do we know being if we only encounter beings? How can we experience God if, as Marion tells us, every (idolatrous) experience of God is like an invisible mirror (GWB, 11–14)? For Marion indeed, human experience of God is like a *mirror* in that human beings want to experience or see God but, in fact, see only the image they themselves have made of God. Human experience of God is then also like an *invisible* mirror in that people like to forget that the God they worship is only a God made after their own likeness. Let us have a brief look at the answers these French philosophers provide.

#### Jean-Yves Lacoste: The Experience of Faith

One can interpret Lacoste’s work as expounding a common belief: the church is one of the few places where one can recover one’s breath, a place of peace and quiet amidst the rat race of modern society. For Lacoste, modernity is characterized by the expansion of technology to the point of (the possibility) of the destruction of the world: modernity and technology are essentially a logic of appropriation. Technology’s appropriation of the world is knowledge put to the service of power.<sup>6</sup> Lacoste proposes to advance ‘liturgy’ or faith to counter technology’s threat to the world. For liturgy transgresses the world and offers to the realms of the means and ends of technology, the excess and surplus of a preoccupation with God that serves, at least in the world that is ours, no direct end: over and against the utility and the costs and benefit analyses of the world stands the gratuity and the uselessness of liturgy, a place where one can learn anew that not all things are at the service of

and available to the logic of appropriation, productivity, and efficacy of the modern world.

Lacoste tries to give a philosophical description of the weal and the woe of an ordinary believer who is liturgically in the midst of the world. A believer, Lacoste argues, has to reckon with a nonexperience. One has to take this nonexperience quite literally. When a believer directs his attention to God in prayer or by participating in the Eucharist, it seems that nothing is happening. Indeed, neither ecstasy nor the blinding spiritual force of a celestine prophecy usually occurs. While believers express a desire to know God or to dwell in God's kingdom, they find themselves in an often tiresome church. If nothing happens, faith is first and foremost a nonexperience.

Lacoste conceives of this nonexperience as a passive encounter with God in which the believer imitates Christ's passivity and obedience toward the will of God. Therefore, the nonexperience of faith is ascetic in that the believer must renounce every desire to appropriate God, to experience God at will (cf. Lk. 22:42). However, Lacoste goes on to describe this ascetic passivity of the believer in terms of object-ness or objectivity, an objectivity, moreover, that is akin to that of the thing; one can say that the believer is in the hands of God as clay is in the hands of the potter (EA, 156). Catherine Pickstock therefore rightly remarks: "For Lacoste, our bodiedness is a sign of our fundamental objectivity in relation to God, more important than any notion of subjective desire, which implies that *undergoing* a relationship with God is more fundamental than desiring it."<sup>7</sup>

But if Lacoste's answer to our age's obsessions with objects is to reverse the terms of subject-object—if, in other words, human beings no longer see God as the object of their own imagination, but if it is God who turns human beings into objects—are we then not once again caught in the web of the problem that we want to resolve? Is not this God in turn, who treats believers as mere things, a bit too much *like* the subject that can only deal with that which it encounters as objects?

### Jean-Luc Marion: Experiencing the Given

A striking parallel to this reversal of the subject-object distinction can be observed in the works of Marion. In *Being Given*, Marion tries to develop an account of the phenomenon as it gives itself by and of itself, without any interference from a human agent. With its intentions and desires, the modern subject, Marion argues, distorts that which gives itself. One can understand

this interpretation of subjectivity in the way in which an accused criminal would narrate the story of the crime he or she has committed. Indeed, it is unlikely that the criminal will relate his or her offence as it really happened. On the contrary, the criminal will distort what happened in order to tell the event of the crime to his own benefit. One cannot expect that the narrative of the crime, related by the criminal, gives an account of the crime as it was in and by itself. The criminal will most often reduce the crime to such an extent that it makes him or her, in one way or another, look good.

To avoid such an interference, Marion tries to describe phenomena as they give themselves, or in his terms, as their 'selves,' to human beings. However, to receive such a givenness, Marion argues, the modern subject is turned into the "clerk" (*IE*, 26) or recorder of that which is given. All intentions and desires of the subject must be subordinated to the gift of the phenomena. How is this possible? How does one encounter the given as it gives itself or its self? Marion's answer is that the phenomena already give themselves *before* any perturbation or interference of a subject can occur. This gift is an appeal one cannot not hear, in the same way that the crime has already been committed when the criminal starts to look for excuses. Marion distinguishes his account of the given both from objects and from beings. Whereas an object is determined within the classical scheme of 'adequation,' meaning that the table is nothing more nor less than an adequate mental representation of a plateau with four legs, beings are determined within an account of finality. The guitar is there *to* play, the pen *to* write, and so on. This finality stems from human beings: they will determine both what is an adequate representation of an object and what use a being has. The given, on the contrary, is given regardless of its actual reception (by human beings). Marion develops an interpretation of reality that no longer relies on man as its measure. 'Givenness' determines every phenomenon without exception. This does not mean, however, that everything is also received: this is so because people's ability to receive is always hindered by desires and intentions, which reduce the capacity to receive; human capacity to receive is reduced to that which we already know or are used to seeing; our intention reduces that which we encounter to that which we can adequately represent of this encounter.

One can elucidate Marion's thinking as follows: given that the crime occurred, an account of it as it was in and by itself is possible; the crime is (a) perfectly given, but the reception of that given (by the criminal, witness, victim) always deforms the account of the crime as it was in itself. It is what Lars von Trier called, in his film *Dogville*, the most difficult thing for

human beings: to receive. Grace is given to us, whether or not we receive it; however, the effects of Grace also depend on our willingness to receive. In this world, as in the film *Dogville*, Grace is often raped, deformed, or not recognized: “He was in the world, but the world did not recognize him” (John 1:10).

How can anything give itself regardless of whether or not it is received? Marion’s answer is very similar to the one of Lacoste. The gift is perfectly given, neither because we aim at it (as we aim at an object) nor because we determine its finality, but because it aims at us. Hence the rather unsettling parallel: “intentionality is inverted: I become the objective of the object” (BG, 146).<sup>8</sup> This seems to be Marion’s solution, from his earlier theological works to his later philosophical argumentations. Givenness aims at us; it points to us as its receiver whether we actually receive or not, just as Christ’s gaze looks at us through the visible wood of the icon even if human beings do not always pay attention to Christ’s presence therein. All that human beings have to do is to record and to register this event as accurately as possible.

### Emmanuel Levinas: The Other’s Otherness

Thus, for Lacoste, human beings are the object of a divine intention. For Marion, human beings are the object and the objective of givenness. The active and autonomous subject is replaced by a passive instance in that the subject’s will to power (over object and beings) is reversed and turned into the “will to powerlessness” (EA, 163) of a clerk. However, if this is the case, is the problem of subjectivity and its supposed mastery over reality really solved? Have we not simply replaced this problem with another by, on the one hand, postulating of God as the (modern) subject or, on the other hand, by granting givenness the contours of subjectivity if only through seeing its gift as a supposed “instituable selfhood” (BG, 165)? It is here that one finds the overarching question of this work, for such a simple reversal of the subject-object distinction makes one wonder whether Lacoste and Marion succeed in overcoming metaphysics, since one could say, following Heidegger in this regard: “the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement.”<sup>9</sup>

At first sight, such a reversal is precisely what Levinas wants to avoid, for one of his fundamental questions is surely how we can avoid seeing the relation between, for instance, human beings and God as a relation between antithetical terms, that is, between “terms that complete one



another and consequently are reciprocally lacking to one another" (*TI*, 103). How should I avoid seeing myself as a subject that aims at the other to determine what use this other can have for me, or, in another manner of speaking, how do I avoid seeing the other as the subject that determines me as his or her object? Levinas' answer is the following: the relation between the other and I is not a relation between antithetical terms, but rather a relation between "terms that suffice to themselves" (*ibid.*). This means that the subject cannot be understood *in relation to* an object and that human beings cannot be understood in relation to God but rather that in order to understand the relation of human beings to God, one must first interpret human beings *as* human beings, that is, as beings that stand on their own, sufficient to themselves, and who are not in need of God to know what it is to be human and finite. Levinas therefore says that human beings must be "capable of atheism" (*TI*, 58). The finite does not point to the infinite as its fulfillment, and neither does the infinite offer the satisfaction of the supposedly inferior finite creature's desire.

This 'relation without relation' indeed discards the traditional account of the creature as a diminution of the transcendent creator. Such an account is the result of a theoretical approach toward transcendence. Such a conscious thematization of this relation will inevitably see God as a term of this relationship. But, according to Levinas, transcendence is not a theoretical affair. God is not the answer to the problems that finitude poses. If God were the answer to the problems of finitude, then God would be not only the term of the relationship but also its terminus. For example, the problem of death is in Christian theology often answered with reference to the promise of eternal life—the finite is supposed to point to, to aim at, this eternal life as its term. But such a solution obviously entails the danger of terminating transcendence and so also terminating human beings' involvement in it. Indeed, all too often, the promise of eternal life has blinded human beings to their ethical duties in the here and now.

According to Levinas, a theoretical account of transcendence overlooks the finite creature's positive role in its relation to transcendence. To put this in Levinas' own terms, the atheism of the creature—and thus its freedom to relate to God—is "a great glory for the creator" (*ibid.*). Levinas is looking for a more existential involvement with transcendence, not the abstract glance of the scientist that terminates transcendence by only thinking of it. For Levinas, "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face" (*TI*, 78); It is only through the face of the other that we might be able to speak of God again. This is the positive role to be played by the

finite being: the creature must attend to the neighbor in an ethical way. 'God' is at stake in our ethical response toward the other. Amidst (post) modern relativism, there is one instance that utters an absolute appeal: the other. This other is the one thing that cannot be theorized, since he or she is always more (or less) than that which I can represent of him or her. Therefore, the other *exceeds* the subject's will to power, but not because he or she is more powerful than I am (which would be to fall back again in an antithetical relation), but because he or she as other is at the same time more and less than I am. He or she is more in the sense that his or her appeal is absolute, and I cannot therefore *not* hear it. But the other is less in the sense that the other's appeal towards me implies that I have the means to respond to it and to help him or her in their destitution. The other does not deprive me of my power and knowledge, but he or she appeals to my power and knowledge precisely to alter their orientation: I do not need them for my own sake, but for that of the other. Levinas says: "I did not know myself so rich, but I have no longer any right to keep anything."<sup>10</sup>

### Theology 'after' Ontotheology

The recurrence of the metaphysical subject-object distinction in the works of Lacoste and Marion is surprising. In both cases, human beings are reduced to a fundamental object-ness (over and against God or givenness, which then takes on the contours of subjectivity). The finite is taken to be an obstacle for people's relation to God. Rather than focusing on our embodiment, Lacoste prefers an objectness toward God like a thing is in the hands of the potter. Rather than allowing any involvement of the human being in his or her relation to God, Marion wants the human being to be the mere clerk of that history. For Levinas, only the other's appeal overcomes the subject's adherence to being and ties the subject solely to ethics. This move redefines the subject's adherence to being as a decentering that is 'not contaminated' by or without "remainder"—as Marion has it (BG, 309)—of being or immanence. It is precisely this desire for a single, univocal approach to immanence and finitude, that is, the phenomenological and/or ethical redescription of it without 'contamination' or 'remainder,' that we need to question, for it might be just here that metaphysical residues remain in the works of Marion, Lacoste, and even Levinas. Such approaches entail that transcendence (whether one names it God or the Other, it matters little) signals itself in a transparent manner and, in doing so, finitude is yet again made to signify *completely*, as if it were part and parcel of an infinite register.

Consider, for instance, the ontotheological manner in which, traditionally, the problem of evil has been taken into account. When someone close to you is sick or dies, the question is posed to God *why* he or she got sick or *why* bad things happen to good people. However, this often implies that God knows the ultimate reason of this sickness or, who knows, might have even *caused* it. 'God' is used to give reasons for the human condition. That sickness or death might not have a single, univocal signification is not taken into account. The same thing occurs in Levinas' works. The human condition and its ambiguities are replaced, yet again, with the "total transparence" (*TI*, 182) of the encounter with the other. Death, for instance, is made to signify for the other: my death ceases to be meaningless, since I can now die for the other, and, in fact, I must, for "nothing can dispense me from the response to which I am held *passively*. The tomb is not a refuge; it is not a pardon. The debt remains" (*GP*, 200 n. 29). I cannot hold anything back, I am completely for-the-other: a finite and separate being "without secrets" (*OB*, 138)—an object(ive) for the Other?

What would happen indeed if immanence cannot totally receive its signification from transcendence? What if, to leap ahead to one of the main theses of this work, immanence cannot be taken as one monolithic block *next to* which one posits one or the other transcendent instance? Such an incarnational approach to transcendence—incarnational, since it encounters transcendence only *through* and *in* immanence, not *despite* or *next to* immanence—is what the conclusion of this book, aiming at a phenomenology of the invisible from *within* this immanent world of ours, sets out to do.

To give but one example: what would the difference be between the objectivity without secrets with regard to God, as we have seen in Marion, Lacoste, and Levinas, and an incarnational approach? Is not this 'God' who turns me into an object when confronted with his gaze or who makes me the object and objective of a gift not once again the Sartrean God/other who cannot do anything but objectify me? Do we not encounter once again the terrible God who knows 'more of Lucien than Lucien did of himself,' as Sartre wrote in *Le mur*? The incarnational approach avoids an identity without secrets by the simple fact that finitude is not fully signified by an otherwise than being. The secret and the sting of finitude remain. The finite I is not only an enigma for itself, but even for God—there is no transparent encounter. This is why the encounter between human beings and God must be construed as an encounter of two singular freedoms. Incarnation entails both God's freedom to appear and the freedom of human beings with regard to God. God's freedom is certain in the sense that the encounter with

transcendence is confined neither to ethics nor to liturgy. God is able to appear anew wherever God wills: in objects, sacraments, persons, or nature. The freedom of human beings to relate to God is safeguarded in the sense that the secret and the sting of their finitude are not made transparent, neither to the other nor to God. Unlike Jonah, to be able to escape God *here* is at the same time to be able to relate freely to God in the decision to pray or in the decision to attend to the neighbor. In this way, one comes close to at least one instance of the biblical encounter with God: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

It is to such a decentered subject that this work tries to point, although it develops this idea from a philosophical perspective, that is, by keeping a close watch on the mystery but also on the muteness of finitude and immanence. In this way, an enquiry into ontotheology (and into the ontotheologies of our era) operates a decentering of the subject that no longer succumbs to the temptation of a ‘pure’ encounter with its other—and that thereby would differentiate between pure and impure encounters. This approach, as the one of James Smith, indeed avoids these attempts to “demarcate the rigid boundaries of the community.”<sup>11</sup>

To develop such an approach taking finitude seriously, I propose to explore the problem of ontotheology in detail. Ontotheology seems to be an intellectual abracadabra. It is used both to justify the disdain against any form of God talk whatsoever and to introduce over against philosophy’s tendency toward idolization, the claim of a revelation prior to reason. I will not give a detailed exegesis of Heidegger’s texts on ontotheology here (which, by the way, are not many) but I will, with broad strokes, introduce what Heidegger meant by metaphysics.

### The Question concerning Ontotheology

Derrida once said that “perhaps onto-theology for Heidegger is not simply a critique of theology, not simply academic discourse, but a real culture.”<sup>12</sup> It is indeed one of the main goals of this work to show in what ways the problem of ontotheology is not confined to the philosopher’s desk. For theologians as well as philosophers, ontotheology should be, at the very least, disturbing. For if ontotheology is not confined to academic discourse, it might have found its way into our cultures as well. If so, the problem is perhaps not to try to eradicate all the forms of but only to make us at least aware of the problem and its possible consequences.

For Heidegger, as we have seen, metaphysics is essentially a forgetting of being. Thought, and in consequence thereof science, is concerned merely with beings and therefore does not open up to the 'ontological difference.' Heidegger contends that 'being' unfolds historically and takes on different postures in the course of time. Being unfolds in and through beings. Heidegger writes that "the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy."<sup>13</sup> And that this challenging-forth, to which the world can *only* appear as "an area of his own representing" and as "an object of research," is "no mere handiwork of man."<sup>14</sup> This "challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve"<sup>15</sup> is rather the result of the subject-object divide that roves through Western philosophy since Descartes. Our era or 'epoch,' Heidegger contends, is thus, and whether we have chosen it to be so or not, a technological one, and perhaps therefore 'the age of the world-picture.' As such, a 'world-picture' results from the view that anyone or anything can have a 'picture' of the world both in general and as it is in itself. Such a view, therefore, presupposes a subject that first extricates itself from the world from out of which it thinks—a worldless ego—and then reduces the world (and its own being-in-the-world) to that which can be represented of it. One should thus note that, for Heidegger, technology is not without philosophical presuppositions. On the contrary: the domination of technology in contemporary societies might simply be an extension of the Cartesian position. For, just as Descartes "prescribes for the world its 'real' Being"<sup>16</sup> in making beings appear as present-at-hand, no longer permitting them to present their being themselves (as, for instance, ready-to-hand), so too "the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*]," which reduces the self-revealing to a standing reserve. The representation of a being thus gets the upperhand over against our everyday encounter with beings ready-to-hand. An example: water is represented (defined, categorized) as H<sub>2</sub>O, but, in fact, in the world, we never drink H<sub>2</sub>O; the piece of wax we see lying on the table is in our factual being-in-the-world almost never a mere extended thing (*res extensa*); we rather, and simply, refer to it as being a candle.<sup>17</sup> This means, among other things, that in and through the 'representation' of the being of water as H<sub>2</sub>O, the being that we are and have to be with water (if you like: our *sein-bei* water)<sup>18</sup> goes unnoticed and is, in a certain sense, forgotten. Nevertheless, Heidegger's point is that the representation of water as H<sub>2</sub>O is derived from or secondary to being-in-the-world with others or with entities within-the-world (as water and stones). Whereas for Descartes, the world was to be conceived of mathematically to such an extent that the medieval *ordo* of the

hierarchy of beings was to be replaced by the rationality of geometry, such that no point in the universe differs qualitatively from another, Heidegger points out that, in our everyday world, “the objective distances of things present-at-hand do not coincide with the remoteness and closeness of what is ready-to-hand.”<sup>19</sup> This is why, for instance, “a pathway which is long ‘objectively’ can be much shorter than one which is ‘objectively’ shorter still but which is perhaps ‘hard going’ and comes before us as interminably long”<sup>20</sup> or why time flies when you are having fun, and so on.

In this sense, Heidegger’s retrieval of the question of being was a retrieval of those things that are closest to us. But that which is closest, he often says, is at the same time that which is furthest, that is, what we usually do not see or notice. This is where phenomenology comes in: as a method to make those things appear that usually do not appear. It might even be that, because of the ontotheological constitution of Western metaphysics, philosophy has not been able to take into account those instances that are closest to us, namely, beings as such, and that it therefore only now can begin to reflect on what it means to exist in a determinate world. One could argue that the technological understanding of ‘being’ obfuscates men and women’s being-in-the-world and that Heidegger envisioned a sort of domination of and by the technological understanding of being. Things are no longer ‘ready-to-hand’ nor ‘present-at-hand,’ but, if you will, out of hand. The ‘supreme danger’ for Heidegger, so it seems, would consist in the fact that the human being, though ‘lord of the earth,’ “comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.”<sup>21</sup> A human being will encounter mere technological constructs to the point of conceiving him-or herself as such a construct. Iain Thomson comments: “[W]e late moderns come to treat even ourselves in the nihilistic terms that underlie our technological refashioning of the world: no longer as conscious subjects standing over against an objective world [. . .], but merely as one more intrinsically meaningless resource to be optimized, ordered, and enhanced with maximal efficiency”<sup>22</sup> It is to such an ‘objectification of the subject’ that I will relate the thoughts of Lacoste, Levinas, and Marion. It is not that these three authors consider the human being as merely one more resource to be optimized, however; it is rather that the metaphors and the methods they use in the larger bulk of their work point toward a *complete* (if not one that can be represented adequately) determination and identification of the being of the human being. Consequently, the human being is treated *as if* it were an object that in principle could be robbed of its mystery and uniqueness.

Unsurprisingly, in our God talk, we encounter the same sort of primacy of beings and objects. For Heidegger indeed has warned us that in our epoch “even God can [ . . . ] lose all that is holy and exalted, the mysteriousness of his distance. [God] can sink to the level of a cause, of *causa efficiens*. He then becomes, even in theology, the god of the philosophers.”<sup>23</sup> The God that enters philosophical discourse is consequently a highly determinate concept of God. Iain Thomson notes that a particular understanding of the being of beings also bears on the question of God: “[I]n so far as metaphysics—as theology—is not satisfied with striving to identify the highest or supreme being (the question of God), but asks further about the mode of God’s existence, metaphysics seeks to understand the being of God (that is, the sense in which God ‘is,’ or the kind of being which God has).”<sup>24</sup> Thus, not only does metaphysics treat ‘God’ as *a* being among all the others, but it also feels no particular reluctance to enquire into the being of God. At this point, we must make mention of Smith’s astonishment about modern rational theology: “[T]he *Westminster Catechism* (1647) [is] completely comfortable asking the question, ‘what is God?’ and provide an answer—with straight face and no apology: ‘God is . . .’”<sup>25</sup> It is such a rational theology that for Levinas would be the accomplice of the “destruction of transcendence” (GP, 56) that characterizes Western philosophy. Therefore, just as human beings are the object of the human sciences because human beings show themselves *as* objects to these sciences (e.g., GDT, 150), so too in theology God is reduced to an object, of which theology, as an “*intellection* of the biblical God” (GP, 56), does not hesitate to determine both its essence and its existence. One can think here, of course, on those abstract debates on the compatibility of God’s all-powerfulness with God’s goodness. In such a theology, Levinas would argue, belief in God is almost automatically reduced to a set of propositions in which God is ‘grasped.’<sup>26</sup> No doubt a catechism would be nothing less than a blasphemy for Levinas!

It seems as if we silently equate the end of metaphysics with the end of all religion, as if God talk is no longer possible because philosophy has, since the discovery of the problem of ontotheology, resigned from thinking something like God. In the wake of Nietzsche, ‘metaphysics’ has been interpreted as a flight into otherworldliness, a realm of suprasensible entities (whether it is the ‘God’ of the Christian religion or the ‘Ideas’ of Platonism), which is opposed to this sensible and material world. This supersensible world, as Heidegger noted, was considered to be “the true and genuinely real world.”<sup>27</sup> The end of metaphysics thus coincides with the awareness “that the suprasensory world is without effective power.”<sup>28</sup> The appraisal

of historical progress that in the aftermath of Nietzsche's groundbreaking work has had the upper-hand—consider, for instance, Marx' utopia—and that simply replaced the *ordo* established on divine decree by the tribunal of reason, could not break the spell of the 'critical reserve' that reached us through Nietzsche's philosophy. Ironically, quite the opposite seemed to be the case. Despite the laughing and dancing of Nietzsche's mad men struggling against the will to power, it seems that we are witnessing the appearance of a haunting nihilism: we find ourselves in a world without god(s), without any orienting guidelines—a world for which there is no manual. Both Heidegger and Levinas observed this loss of orientation. Heidegger realized that after the downfall of God as the goal of earthly life, "nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself." Therefore, "the thinking through of Nietzsche's metaphysics becomes a reflection on the situation and the place of contemporary man."<sup>29</sup> Levinas, as we have seen, argues that the attending to the other human being provides the orientation that is lacking in this "new epoch, marked by the death of God" (*GDT*, 124). In *Humanism of the Other*, Levinas decries the disorientation accompanying the "antiplatonism of contemporary philosophy" (cf. *HAM*, 18). This disorientation is, according to Levinas, the consequence of the relativism and the historicism that underlie an ontology hailing multivocality and pluralism and that lacks "the sense of the senses" (*HAM*, 24) and the "absolute orientation" (*HAM*, 27) inflected upon us by the other human being. Such an ontology would no longer be able to differentiate between what matters and what does not matter.

Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that an ontotheological procedure is an effective means to hold back "the flood-waters of ontological historicity for a time—the time of an epoch"<sup>30</sup> and in so doing provides a ground for our existence *ohne warum*. For Heidegger, however, metaphysics is not just a philosophical doctrine among others. On the contrary, it is a structural phenomenon: "Heidegger's claim is that by giving shape to our historical understanding of 'what is,' metaphysics determines the most basic presuppositions of what *anything* is, including ourselves."<sup>31</sup> Metaphysics is therefore an underlying structure or horizon out of which whatever appears can appear. Metaphysics asks what a being is and answers this question by giving an account of the being of these beings: "To establish an answer to the question 'What is an entity?' metaphysics makes a claim about what (and how) entities are, and thus about the *being* of those entities."<sup>32</sup>

Common to all metaphysical systems is that this question of the being of a being is always understood in a double manner: as ontological and



theological. As ontology, it looks for the essence of beings from which all beings have something in common. ‘*Onto-logik*’ is the discipline that “thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such.” At the same time, however, metaphysics is theological. This occurs when it not only asks for what the different and diverse empirical beings have in common but also when it “thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything.”<sup>33</sup> Metaphysics thinks beings, says Heidegger, “in a twofold manner: in the first place, the totality of beings as such with an eye to their most universal traits [. . .] but at the same time also the totality of beings as such in the sense of the highest and therefore divine being. In the former mode it is ontology; in the latter, theology.”<sup>34</sup> In this sense, the question of the being of a being is always and already answered from out of one (particular) being. Therefore, Levinas’ understanding of ‘being otherwise’ as an infinite regress seems to give a lucid account of what is at stake in Heidegger’s understanding of ontotheology. In this work, I will indeed try to forge a connection between that which Levinas understands as the ‘bad infinite’ of being otherwise, which consists in the negation of the finite in order to obtain an infinite instance, and Heidegger’s understanding of ontotheology. The ‘bad infinite’ leads to what Jean-Marc Narbonne has depicted as the “regression *ad infinitum* of a being which explains a being which explains a being.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, the bad infinite that Levinas distinguishes from the transcendence of the illeity would be similar to what has been called the “ontic reduction of ontotheology,” namely, the reduction to a being (whether it be the highest or not).<sup>36</sup>

To make matters more concrete: the ‘essence’ of a table, for instance, is that it is ‘a plateau with four legs.’ It is this essence that will come to determine the existence of particular tables (and even to what extent a particular table can be said to exist). This essence, then, is understood from what diverse particular tables have in common. The essence of the table is that it is a plateau with four legs, in that all empirical tables *share* this property. This ‘*Ontologik*’ will yield to ‘*Theologik*’ when a leap is made from this ‘essence’ to someone or something that determines the essence of this thing in advance of the existence of a particular table. Indeed, the essence or ‘whatness’ retains a reference to the empirical being of the table: it is from diverse tables that ‘essence’ is abstracted. To avoid this reference to particularity (immanence, thatness, etc.) metaphysics leaps into a ‘transcendent’ being, which is supposed to have the ‘Idea’ of this essence eternally *without* any empirical ‘instantiation’ or ‘actualization’ of the essence. This is where the infinite regress is at issue. In the words of Heidegger, when

beings come to be determined from out of their essence, and insofar as this essence still clings onto the ontic existence of beings and “thus in a certain way is something that is (*on*), the [essence], as such a being, demands *in turn* the determination of its being.”<sup>37</sup> One can think here of the Platonic ideas or the ‘God’ of medieval theology, as the one who, supposedly unfounded or founded in and through Godself, grounds the essence of beings by just thinking them, or by creating these imperfect beings of which God is said to eternally have the perfect idea. If this is correct, one might say that the ‘end of metaphysics’ is the end of speaking of anything or anyone *in general*. I will show below that it is in this direction that Levinas, Marion, and to a certain extent Lacoste too will take Heidegger’s understanding of ontotheology. Ontotheology’s point of departure—beings—forbids that it encounters anything *other* at the end of the chain of beings, than *a* being. In this sense, it is close to the bad infinite. Ontotheology proclaims that a being is what it is only insofar as its contingent mode of being *corresponds*, and is thereby grounded, to the essence of this particular being. ‘God’ can thus only appear here in the light of a correspondence theory, as that being, albeit the highest, who assures a perfect fit between the essence or the ‘being’ of a being and the empirical being itself.

Ontotheology’s obsession with objects decides in advance how God will enter the philosophical discourse. For, as such, the problem of ontotheology is not that it invokes God too easily, but it is rather that, through its preoccupations with beings, it will also think or use God in a particular manner, namely, as a function that outwits the endless referral of beings to other contingent beings. Ontotheology will think God in the very same manner as it thinks beings. “To think beings instead of being [ . . . ] is to think what is revealed, what comes to presence, rather than to think the mystery of the unconcealment, the coming to presence.”<sup>38</sup> To come back to our example of the table: when the table is determined and defined as a ‘plateau with four legs,’ this essence is abstracted not only from what all tables have in common but also from that which is presented by every particular table we encounter. What the different tables have in common will be configured as that which is ‘most present’ or ‘most being-full’ in the table. This ‘ideal’ essence, which can be held in thought, is what is ‘actualized’ or ‘incarnated’ in every particular table. However, since this essence is considered to be ‘more real’ than any particular table, every particular appearance of a table will, accordingly, be considered only to be an inferior instantiation of the essence of a table, as when one compares a table missing one leg to the ‘idea’ of a table with four legs. In the same way, ‘God’ will be thought as that being that perfectly instantiates the imperfections of the material world.

God will be thought of as either the creator who creates an inferior world, a conception which we have already seen Levinas lamenting, or as the one who lies ahead of us as the one whose perfection has already been realized.<sup>39</sup> It is precisely the appearance of such a cleft “between the merely apparent being here below and the real being somewhere up there” that Heidegger will identify as metaphysics, and that, at least according to Heidegger, arose with Plato and is rehearsed by Christianity through “reinterpreting the Below as the created and the Above as the Creator.”<sup>40</sup>

Next to its shuddering before contingency and its craving for unity and univocity, metaphysics conceives of the being of beings always with an eye to its foundation or ground. It is here that one needs to understand that ontotheology is not primarily a theological question, or, as Mabile puts it, a bad theological response to a good philosophical question.<sup>41</sup> Yet this is exactly how the problem of ontotheology is most often perceived. Westphal, for instance, distinguishes between theology and the language of prayer and praise in order to at least safeguard the latter from the accusation of ontotheology. Westphal notes that the critique of ontotheology concerns the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of our God-talk. In this sense, for Westphal, the critique of ontotheology is directed more to the primacy of theory rather than to the practice of praise. *Here* we have a bad theological response to a good philosophical question, in that it lets a kind of fideism emerge at the expense of all rationality and the seeking of reasons for the Christian faith.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the highest being need not be divine, but consists only in a *determinate function*, namely, “to render the whole of reality intelligible for philosophical reflection” by proclaiming one or the other Supreme Being “in relation to which all beings must be understood,” whether through historical progress or through the reference to another being, albeit divine.<sup>43</sup> Since ontotheology has different postures, it is for this reason that one must ask if and to what extent ontotheology has made its way into Christian theology and into its language of praise as well. Indeed, no flight to a suprasensory world is needed to find a highest being. One might therefore say that while not all metaphysics is ontotheological (here in the sense of evoking the name of God), all ontotheology is metaphysical. This is already obvious in Heidegger’s account of Nietzsche. Commenting upon the latter, with a phrasing that reminds one of Derrida’s theory of a ‘transcendental signifier,’ Heidegger writes:

To be sure, something else can still be attempted in face of the tottering of the dominion of prior values. That is, if God in the sense of the Christian god has disappeared from his authoritative

position in the suprasensory world, then *this authoritative place itself is always preserved*, even though as that which has become empty. The now-empty authoritative realm of the suprasensory and the ideal world can still be adhered to. What is more, *the empty place demands to be occupied anew* and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else.<sup>44</sup>

To sum up, if we affirm here Heidegger's statement that a reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement, then we have yet to understand *why* the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains metaphysical indeed. If, as we have seen in the authors under discussion, a reversal of the subject-object distinction is at issue, in that in one way or another human beings turn into the 'object and the objective' of an autonomous instance (whether it is God, givenness, or the Other), then one should ponder to what extent these metaphysical residues point us in a different direction than a fair amount of authors on the theme of 'overcoming ontotheology' have taken. The guiding question of this book is consonant with one of Marion's questions: "[I]f there is such a thing as ontotheology, [and] if this concept has a precise sense (non-ideological, not vague), when did it start to operate and how far does its concept extend?"<sup>45</sup>